

S. Heidbrink: Exploring the Religious Frameworks of the Digital Realm

EXPLORING THE RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORKS OF THE DIGITAL REALM: OFFLINE–ONLINE–OFFLINE TRANSFERS OF RITUAL PERFORMANCE

by

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Looking at the constantly growing field of religion online, the shifts in and the new definition of religious frameworks become an increasingly important topic. In the field of religious rituals, it is not only the participant, location and conduction of the ritual that is affected by this shift; also the researchers have to overthrow their former theologically resp. systemic based definition of religiousness and spirituality due to the fact that on the Internet, religion is defined and realized in a completely different way by its participants. This is true even in the field of Christianity as the example of a ritual created by some British „Emerging Church“ groups shows.

These loosely defined groups which span all denominational borders of the Christian spectrum have been established since the late 1980s mainly in the UK in order to organize church services they refer to as „Alternative Worship“. The Internet plays an important role as a platform of communication and (self-)organization of the members and as technically and aesthetically challenging means of (re)presentation. Some events that were conducted in real life, like the multimedia labyrinth installation in St Paul`s cathedral in 2000, have even been „reconstructed“ in virtual space,¹ generating a new form of worship.

Interestingly but not unexpectedly, these transfer processes entail consequences for spirituality in real life. What exactly happens during the transfer into the digital realm? What are the interdependencies between offline and online and how do they affect worship and worshippers? These questions will be followed, employing the results and ideas of modern Ritual and Religious Studies, shedding light on a new field of (post)modern Christianity.

¹ <http://www.labyrinth.org.uk>, retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

THE CYBERSPACE AS RITUAL SPACE? [1]

„Would any of you deny that legitimate worship services occur via television? I dare say a paradigm shift had to occur when worship services moved from the realm of radio to television. A similar paradigm shift probably occurred when worship moved from the pulpit to broadcast radio ... and when it moved from hand-written word to the printing press ... and when it moved from oral history to the written word ... Meaningful worship is independent of the technological level of the worshiper. [sic!] Online rituals are, in my experience, as powerful and transformational as any ritual in the face to face world.“²

Even though this quote derives from a Pagan website, the statement seems to be true for all religious groups and denominations facing the problem of how to deal with the new media, which are technically challenging the whole frameworks of theology up to religious practice.

The quoted text can be traced back to the year 2001³ and deals with the question whether it is possible to perform Pagan rituals by coming together in a chatroom:

„You can't share your drumming or your dancing with these people, you can't hold hands or use vocal intonations, they can't see the candles you light or smell the incense you burn ... or can they? Is it possible, in any meaningful sense of the word, to cast a circle and raise energy by use of computer and modem? I submit that it is.“⁴

The example of Walking Stick is not the earliest example of virtual worship in the late 20th century. As early as 1997 the Christian Orthodox priest Father John Missing posted an „Online ritual invitation and instruction“⁵ to the English usenet. Even though his so called „Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle“ that apparently met every Tuesday night in an Internet Relay chatroom was clearly influenced by Christian liturgy, his goal was to „be open and inviting to ALL spiritual traditions. Some rituals may be conducted by

² Walking Stick: *The Care and Feeding of Online Rituals*. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from *The Pagan Library*
http://www.paganlibrary.com/rituals_spells/care_feeding_of_online_ritual.php.

³ The earliest record of the quoted webpage according to the Internet Archive Wayback Maschine dates back to May 27, 2001.

⁴ Walking Stick: *The Care and Feeding of Online Rituals*. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from *The Pagan Library*
http://www.paganlibrary.com/rituals_spells/care_feeding_of_online_ritual.php.

⁵ Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006 from
<http://www.ibiblio.org/london/agriculture/forums/sustag2/msg00045.html>.

*others who observe some of these other traditions. We are not affiliated with any religious institution, and will govern our affairs in a democratic manner.”*⁶

The ritual that was – as the sociologist Christopher Helland pointed out – adopted from an even older online ritual by another pastor on the AOL network⁷ was based on text readings and exchange of thoughts by various participants of the group.

By establishing the „Cyberspace as ritual space“ the authors of both examples refer to the advantages and disadvantages of having the only means of communication manifesting itself as text on a computer screen whereas in a real-life scenario, the performative aspects can be much more than written text. Additionally there were problems of technically caused delay, loss of data or even the interruption of the Internet connection.

However, the authors did not and could not foresee the speed of the technical developments which would take place in the following years until today when the interconnection and interconnectivity of web applications accumulated in what usually (and slightly euphemistically) is called „Web 2.0“. ⁸ Nowadays, religious individuals and organizations do not only have to come to terms with the representation of religious content on the Internet – they even have to decide, whether or not to express and practice their religion within the newly created virtual – and ritual – spaces.⁹

„INDIVIDUAL RELIGIOUSNESS“ AND „INDIVIDUAL RITUALITY“ [2]

This fact creates new challenges for those scholars, who research the multiplicity of religious expressions (in the broadest sense) on the Internet. There,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Helland, Chr. (2005). Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1(1). Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823,1-16>.

⁸ For the development and usage of the expression (that has further to be problematised) please see: <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>. The current development in these web applications indicate an imminent change in religious expressions on the Internet will be subject to further analysis in my dissertation.

⁹ For the Neopagan cluster see e.g. The Spiral Goddess Altar, retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.spiralgoddess.com/MyOwnAltar.html>, recorded at the Internet Archive since December 12, 2000. For the Christian cluster see e.g. the Redemptoris Mater Chapel of the late pope John Paul II, retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from http://www.vatican.va/redemptoris_mater/index_en.htm, recorded at the Internet Archive since November 27, 2003.

it is possible not only to follow the adaptation and adoption processes of religious individuals and institutions to the new means of communication. One can also (maybe for the first time in history) make visible what has so far been designated as „invisible religion“.¹⁰ Within the context of the Heidelberg research project of religion on the Internet it has since been denoted as „Patchwork Religion“¹¹ expressing the fact that individuals create their own personal religious and ritual framework irrespective of theological norms and doctrines. This opens up a new and individualized perspective on religious historiography which we call „Individual Religiousness“¹² The same applies to rituals as performative aspect of religiosity.¹³ Therefore the concept of „Individual Rituality“¹⁴ is currently being development within the mentioned project that tries to describe the discourses and processes that lead to the framework of an individual perspective on religion and rituals.

„ONLINE RITUALS“ AND PROCESSES OF TRANSFER [3]

Within the wide field of these performative expressions one can distinguish between „Rituals Online“ and „Online Rituals“ based on the initial differentiation between „Online Religion“ and „Religion Online“ by Christopher Heland.¹⁵ The term „Rituals Online“ describes ritual prescripts, ritual descriptions etc. that are provided on webpages or are discussed in forums or chats. „Online Rituals“ however refer to those ritual settings that are being performed in virtual spaces online. This distinction is idealized and – espe-

¹⁰ Luckmann, Th. (1967). *The Invisible Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

¹¹ Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). Rituals Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 2(1). Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6957>. For first approaches to the Christian cluster see <http://www.rituals-online.de/en/>. Retrieved November 19, 2006, 54-52.

¹² For further information concerning the concept „Individual Religiousness“ see the website of the Heidelberg Research Project for Rituals on the Internet. Retrieved November 18, 2006 from <http://www.rituals-online.de/en/>.

¹³ For the cluster of German „witches“ see Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). Rituals Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 2(1). Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6957>. For first approaches to the Christian cluster see <http://www.rituals-online.de/en/>. Retrieved November 19, 2006, 54-72.

¹⁴ The term „Individual Rituality“ describes the dynamic patchwork processes of individuals concerning rituals as practical and performative expression of their personal religiosity. The term is to be understood as performative aspect of „Individual Religiousness“ and has to be analysed from the perspective of „Ritual Dynamics“. Like „Individual Religiousness“, the concept „Individual Rituality“ draws from the pool of available cultural elements and religious tradition as well as the participant's religious biography and is subject to dynamic patchworking processes. Together with Nadja Miczek the author is currently preparing a publication concerning the presentation of this concept.

cially concerning „Online Rituals“ – hardly ever to be found in this pure form. Usually performative action is demanded to a certain degree beyond the online setting as the example of the online version of the Holy Communion by the Alpha Church¹⁶ clearly shows. Even though the participant follows the instruction given by the website, the performance like taking bread and wine is conducted offline.

These rituals¹⁷ are analyzed from the perspective of modern ritual theory which from an ethic point of view emphasizes the dynamics rather than stasis as common element of all ritual occurrence¹⁸ The concept of „Ritual Transfer“¹⁹ as an aspect of „Ritual Dynamics“ is one of the most helpful theories for explaining how ritual settings and/or ritual performances in „Online Rituals“ are transfused to and „reconstructed“ in the digital realm.

According to the theory of „Ritual Transfer“ each ritual changes when being transferred to another context or when the context surrounding the ritual is being transformed.²⁰ These processes of transfer of ritual or its consistutive elements and „building blocks“ can take place within time or space, most prominently seen when ritual participants migrate to other social or cultural settings.²¹ The transformation might affect „internal dimensions“ of the ritual like script, performance, aesthetics, structure, interaction, communication, mediality, symbolism, ascribed meaning etc. and might be evoked by contex-

¹⁵ Helland, Chr. (2000). Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas. In: Hadden, J., Cowan, D. (Eds.), *Religion on the Internet. Research Prospects and Promises* (Religion and the Social Order 8). London: JAI Press / Elsevier Science, 205-223 and Helland, Chr. (2005). Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1(1). Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823,1-16>.

¹⁶ Alpha Church Service of Holy Communion. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.alphachurch.org/holycomm.htm>.

¹⁷ The term „ritual“ in our interpretation has to be understood as polythetic class. See Snoek, J. (2006). Defining 'Rituals'. In: Kreinath, J., Snoek, J., Stausberg, M. (Eds.) (2006). *Theorizing Rituals Vol. 1. Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*. Leiden: Brill, 3-14.

¹⁸ For the modern approach to ritual see Kreinath, J., Snoek, J., Stausberg, M. (Eds.) (2006). *Theorizing Rituals Vol. 1. Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*. Leiden: Brill. For further details concerning „Ritual Dynamics“ see the website of the Heidelberg University Collaborative Research Center 619 „Dynamics of Rituals“. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.

¹⁹ Langer, R., Lüddeckens, D., Radde, K., Snoek, J., (2006). Transfer of Ritual. *Journal of Ritual Studies*. 20(1), 1-10.

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹ As illustrative example the programmatic article quotes the burying rites of the Parsis (Indian Zoroastrians). After moving to Western Europe exposing their dead to be eaten by birds of prey was not possible any more and they had to significantly alter their ritual practice. Ibid, 1.

tual aspects like geography, culture, ecosystem, society, gender, history, etc.²² „(...) When a ritual is transferred, i.e. when one or more of its contextual aspects is changed, changes in one or more of its internal dimensions can also be expected.“²³ A third dimension consists of the participants as agents of the ritual occurrences who again are embedded into and influenced by the different context aspects and therefore form and shape the internal dimensions.

The theory of „Ritual Transfer“ also applies when a ritual is transferred – as discussed above – from an offline setting into the virtual space of the Internet.²⁴ This change of media and mediality causes specific modifications within in the structures of communication, interaction and in the case of „Online Ritual“ especially within the frameworks of ritual performance as will be exemplarily shown in a short case study below.

OFFLINE-ONLINE-PROCESSES OF RITUAL PERFORMANCE – A CASE STUDY [4]

In the year 2000 several groups belonging to the Christian liturgy reform movement „Emerging Church“²⁵ constructed a labyrinth installation in the south transept of St Paul’s cathedral in London. In the course of what is called „Alternative Worship“²⁶ by the groups they built „a contemporary version of a cathedral labyrinth which combines ancient Christian tradition with contemporary music, meditations, art, media and activities at intervals along the path“.²⁷ It consisted of „a pathway mapped on the ground for the participants to follow. En route there were various stations at which the participant paused to

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler has shown that fact exemplarily in the witch cluster. Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). Rituals Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 2(1) <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6957>, 54-72. For first approaches to the Christian cluster see <http://www.rituals-online.de/en/>. Both retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

²⁵ For the problems of describing the „Emerging Church“ as movement and for further insight into the discourses within and about the groups see Bader-Saye, S. (2006). Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6(1), 13-23 and the website <http://emergingchurch.info/>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

²⁶ For a detailed overview of the self-conception and the goals of Alternative Worship and the respective groups, see e.g.: Roberts, P. (1999). *Alternative Worship in the Church of England*. Cambridge: Grove Books and the website <http://www.alternativeworship.org/>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

²⁷ Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/historypage1.html>.

listen to a track of music and a meditation on a Discman and participate in some symbolic or ritual action. The labyrinth incorporated a mix of items recognisably within the tradition of Christian worship, things used in everyday life and current technology”.²⁸

The groups that constructed the St Paul’s cathedral labyrinth²⁹ apparently relied on the works and ideas of Lauren Artress³⁰ at the Episcopal Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. And like the Grace Cathedral Labyrinth,³¹ the St Paul’s version was also reconstructed within the virtual space.³²

Consequently there were some major changes between the original labyrinth that was built up in real-life (and which is visible as transcript on the quoted website)³³ and the version that was reconstructed for online performance³⁴ and which can be described as „Online Ritual” according to the theories explained above.

After removing the (virtual) shoes, the participant is asked to navigate through the labyrinth realized as streaming flash animations one station after the other. In an explanatory preface one can read the following instructions:

This is an online translation of the Cathedral Labyrinth (...) The original is described as ‘an interactive installation for spiritual journeys’. It consists of a pathway mapped out on the floor for visitors to follow. During this journey participants pause and listen to a piece of music and a meditation. They also undertake some symbolic action or ritual.

With this online version the pieces of music are the same (make sure your speakers are turned on) but the actions and activities have been translated to suit the medium.

Looking at the various transformations of the said labyrinth installation from a real-life construction in a church to a prescript on a website and fi-

²⁸ Baker, J. M. (2000). *The Labyrinth. Ritualisation as Strategic Practice in Postmodern Times*. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.yfc.btinternet.co.uk/files/laby.pdf>, 4.

²⁹ For photographs of the original St Paul’s labyrinth see <http://www.smallfire.org/labyrinthpage1.html>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

³⁰ Artress, L. (1996). *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth*. Riverhead: New York.

³¹ <http://www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/interactions/index.shtml>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

³² <http://www.yfc.co.uk/labyrinth/online.html>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

³³ <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/textpagemap.html>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

³⁴ <http://www.yfc.co.uk/labyrinth/online.html>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

nally to a navigable and performable „Online Ritual“ the concept of „Ritual Transfer“ can successfully be applied to describe the changes within the „contextual aspects“ that influenced and altered the „internal dimensions“ of the ritual in the underlying transformation processes.

The most prominent „contextual aspect“ that has to be taken into consideration is clearly that of the change of media. By transferring the ritual setting into Cyberspace the spatial dimensions of performance, aesthetics, interaction and communication and thus the mediality are influenced as one can see by comparing the three different labyrinths given on the St Paul's labyrinth website.³⁵ While it is hardly possible in the real-life labyrinth to omit a station en route without transgressing the preset path, the same thing can easily be done in the online version, to state only one example.

Additionally, the stations on the way had to be adapted to fit the Cyberspace scenario that significantly altered the performance to mouse clicks³⁶ while trying to transport the message. Interestingly, even in the offline labyrinth the creators made use of virtual representations like computer generated „virtual“ candles at the tenth station that could easily be included in the online version.

*The choice to use virtual candles rather than real ones is strategic. The surprising thing is that rather than being naff, they do evoke a sense of sacred space, and the ritual seems to work with the technology, at least for a large proportion of participants. They function somewhat like an 'icon of the present', representing the mystery of the faith in the language of the here and now.*³⁷

Therefore additionally to the offline-online transformation processes of ritual settings and performance one can also see the reverted case of online-offline transfers from the digital into the „carnal“ realm.

³⁵ <http://www.labyrinth.org.uk/>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

³⁶ Depending on the theological viewpoint this fact might or might not cause consequences for the acknowledgement of the efficacy of the ritual – as e.g. at the 6th station symbolizing the eucharist by providing bread and wine and its virtual reconstruction. See <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/textpage6.html>. For an explanation of the intended meaning of the station see <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/theorypage8.html>. Both retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006

³⁷ Baker, J. M. (2000). *The Labyrinth. Ritualisation as Strategic Practice in Postmodern Times*. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.yfc.btinternet.co.uk/files/laby.pdf>, 33 and <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/textpage10.htm>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

CONCLUSIONS [5]

As shown above in the case of the St Paul's labyrinth one can identify various offline-online-offline transformation processes that can be explained by applying the dynamic concept of „Ritual Transfer“. The question arises whether the perception of the participants and creators of the respective installations share the notion of the „Dynamic of Rituals“ with respect to the transfer of ritual elements to Cyberspace and to the fact that ritual elements are in both the offline and online version of the labyrinth installation or whether this notion persists as an ethic perspective of researchers of religion, as often observed in other ritual settings. In the case of the labyrinth this is answered by some theoretical outlines accompanying the online labyrinth:

*One characteristic that I would add to the (...) list of characteristics of alternative worship is the strategic use of ritual itself. (...) It is commonly assumed that ritual is used to maintain a rigid and dogmatic tradition. Anti-ritualists arise precisely because of this view. (...) Within tradition, the use of ritual can be 'a particularly effective means of mediating tradition and change, that is as a medium for appropriating some changes while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity'. One of the reasons for this is because ritual, even if relatively new and invented has the semblance of having been passed down from previous generations. So the appropriation of ritual by alternative worship groups is highly strategic in this sense.*³⁸

In this sense one has to ask if the creators of the labyrinth installation are truly to be referred to as „postmodern“³⁹ due to the fact that their understanding of ritual clearly reflects the current notions that can be subsumed under ritual designers consciously patchworking across the borders and norms of traditional religious and ritual frameworks.⁴⁰

For modern Ritual Studies the example of the Emerging Church's labyrinth provides a fruitful example for demonstrating the dynamic processes and the eclectic use of ritual building blocks, means of communica-

³⁸ Ibid., 28 ff. and <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/theorypage8.html>. Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006.

³⁹ For the self-description of the „Emerging Church“ see e.g. Bader-Saye, S. (2006). Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6(1), 13-23

⁴⁰ For an analysis of „Ritual Design“ and „patchworking processes“ in religious settings on the Internet see Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). Rituals Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 2(1). Retrieved Sunday, November 19, 2006, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6957>, 54-72.

tion, interaction, performance and medial expressions within the growing fields of religion and rituals on the Internet.